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## 5/22/89: The Hunger of Provincials

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*This piece is excerpted from the manuscript of Philip J. Cunningham's forthcoming book, Tiananmen Moon, part of an [on-going China Beat feature of excerpts from Cunningham's book](#). Interested readers can see more at [Cunningham's website](#).*

By Philip J. Cunningham

On the evening of May 22, BBC asked me to take one of the crews to the Square for a closer look at the protest, which was thought to be on the wane now that martial law was coming into force. We did the usual look-see, I conducted a few spot interviews and the talented camera crew captured ironic and iconic visuals. Then we took a break in front of the History Museum, parking the hotel van near the camp of the provincial students.

The protesters around us didn't seem to mind our presence, until we decided to crack out the beverages. It was hard to enjoy the hotel-bought drinks we had kept stored in an icebox in the back of the van while in the midst of so many under-nourished, homeless students from the countryside. The problem of eating well in front of people who had less access to food was a familiar one, something I had experienced on the set of *The Last Emperor* and *Empire of the Sun*. We almost had a riot one day on the during a location shot on the Bund for the Spielberg film, as the cast and crew ate a hotel-catered lunch in the midst of 5000 hungry extras whose food had been duly paid for but never arrived, due to some sticky-fingered comprador or official intermediary.

Thus it was with some reluctance that I extracted a can of iced cold soda from the icebox. Just then I noticed a young man in dusty clothes staring at me through thick black-rimmed glasses, eyeing the Coke I had in my hand. He had a wiry build and sported a flattop crew cut that made him look more a

police cadet than student. But there was something extremely sympathetic about him too, he had a wide-eyed but vulnerable expression on his face, as if he wanted to talk but was afraid. I offered him a can of soda from the BBC icebox.

"Thank you, man!" he said nervously in English. He smiled like a baby who had just gotten his bottle. He downed the bubbly drink so fast I felt sorry for him.

"Here you go, friend." I said, tossing him another.

"Do you know about the fighting outside the city?" He asked, face drawn with earnest tension until he burped.

"What? Fighting? Tell me about it."

"The troops starting beating the common people," he said, rushing into a description of the incident.

"How do you know about this?"

"I was there!" he said authoritatively. "Do you want to know about it? Are you a reporter?"

"Sort of. An interpreter. A freelancer, actually. For the BBC. That's the crew," I said, pointing to the tailgate party.

"Nice vehicle, what model is that?" he asked.

"I don't have the slightest idea," I answered honestly. He looked me over from head to toe as if to say how could you not know what model of car you have?

"I'm Wang Li," he said. "I'm from Xian. I give you this information." He handed me some scribbled ideographs on a crumpled sheet of paper.

"Listen, little Wang, you can call me Jin, 'jin' as in gold. Jin Peili,"

Taking a closer look at his notes, I could barely make out his writing, but there was a list of some place names, times and dates.

"Thanks for the information, but the BBC probably won't have the time to look into such a specific incident, even recorded in detail such as this."

"But isn't this news?"

"It may be," I said. "But TV news is, um, different. There's a lot of information that never makes it on air." He looked as disappointed as a puppy that had just returned a stick that its owner didn't want to throw anymore.

"This might be useful for a newspaper, but TV news is, well, forget it."

"Do you want more information?" he asked.

"Sure, let's keep in touch," I said, not sure if I meant it or not. I had met too many unusual characters lately, and some of them were so weird I had lost confidence in the cliché that a stranger was a friend I hadn't met yet.

"Okay, I tell you what," I said, trying not to sound too encouraging, "if you have some interesting news, you can call me at the Beijing Hotel, my room number is 1413. And how can I get in touch with you?"

"I am always here, on Tiananmen Square, with the provincial students," he said. "Just ask for Wang Li from Xian."

Later that evening he telephoned my room, waking me up.

"I'm Wang Li," the husky voice says, "I met you on the Square, I have something very important to tell you."

"What time is it now?"

"12:15, I'm in the downstairs coffee shop waiting for you."

"Okay, okay, I'll be right down."

Coffee shop? At this time of night? Not in the Beijing Hotel. This place closes down early. So what does he want? Food, I could offer him, a place to stay? Well. Anticipating his request, I opened the refrigerator and stuffed all the food and drink I could squeeze into my shoulder bag.



The lobby is dark and forbidding. The red carpet is inky, almost black. There are no attendants anywhere in sight. When I pass the decorative screen that is designed to keep ghosts out of the lobby I can see some people sitting in the empty coffee lounge. Four young men, no, it's three men and a woman sitting around a low round table masked in shadow. At an adjacent table I can make out the silhouette of two young men. One of them leaps up and waves me over excitedly. It is Wang Li. "Jin, ni hao," Wang Li says in greeting, approaching me with outstretched hands. "This is my friend Hu, he is also a student from Xian," he says. Hu and I say hello and shake hands while Wang Li fumbles nervously in his pockets for something. "Here are our student ID cards, I want you to trust us."

I scan the cards briefly in the dim light and give them back. I put the fruit juice and snacks on the table and take a seat.

"Jin, there is so much I have to tell you," Wang Li erupts, as if we were old friends.

"Have something to drink first," I insist, trying to pre-empt his request. I hand him some food and drink. He hands me a jagged piece of paper with notes scribbled on it. I can't help but notice that the coffee shop menu that lay open on the table had part of a page ripped out of it that matched the angular shape of his note like a jigsaw puzzle piece.

Written in the coffee-stained margins next to "CHILLED LYCHEES IN SYRUP" and "YOGHURT WITH HONEY" are scribbled the words: "Liuliqiao, army troops, 70 civilians receive injury, tomorrow huge demonstration in protest."

Wang Li and Hu gulp down the juice and ravage the snacks as if they had just ended a private hunger strike. While they eat, I look at the other table where a group of four young people are talking in low whispers next to the ornate ghost screen that blocked view from the entrance.

"Listen, troops have arrived northeast of Beijing. There are thousands of soldiers, tanks, and I heard there are trucks full of ammunition," Wang Li says, as if trying to earn his keep.

"How do you know?"

"We were there," he says with a hint of pride. And then anticipating further questions, he adds, "We know a journalist needs evidence, so we want to go back and take pictures."

"Isn't that kind of risky?"

"No, we must do it, Jin. Can I borrow your camera?" He reads the doubt on my face. "You can keep my ID card until I return with the camera."

"No, no, that's not necessary. I trust you," I respond, using the immortal words of someone about to be conned. Actually I didn't trust him. If anything his offer of the ID made me a little suspicious. If he were really a student why was he flashing his ID around? No one else did that.

"Thank you," he says, looking greatly relieved. "You are a friend."

"Where have you been sleeping?"

"On the Square," he answers.

"What about tonight?"

"No sleep. We will be out all night looking for troops."

"You have to get some sleep some time," I answer, playing the role of older brother. I didn't have that kind of stamina or drive.

I was starting to admire this guy's dedication to the cause.

"I'll tell you what, tomorrow you can shower and nap in my room if you want, okay?"

Even as the words left my mouth I wasn't sure why I made the offer, but it got me off the hook tonight. And I did feel for these ragamuffins. We shared a powerful curiosity in common; we were interested in finding out what was really going on, but we weren't journalists, not them, not me. I couldn't forget how I was almost reduced to sleeping on the streets during the early vigils at Tiananmen.

"Can you give me some film, too?" he pleads, revealing sharper bargaining skills as my skepticism softened.

"Yeah, okay. By the way," I ask, pointing to the figures in the shadows about 20 feet away, "Who are those people sitting at the table over there?"

"They're our student leaders. That's Wang Dan, Wuerkaixi, Chai Ling and Feng Congde."

"The student leaders?" I ask in disbelief. Isn't this a government hotel?

We got up to leave. I walked past the other table to get a closer look. The quiet conference in progress momentarily went silent as we walked by. On the way out, I give my camera to Wang Li, not sure if I'd see it or him again. Even so I felt a pang of guilt. Is it right for me to encourage him to go running after troops?

And what are the student leaders doing in the Beijing Hotel in the middle of the night? Is someone protecting them, do they have a powerful benefactor in the building? It's close to Tiananmen Square, and in a way, it's a good hideout. After all, who would expect to find them here? Like Shanghai in the '30s where the underground communists frequented the same bars, brothels and hotels as the anti-communist city bosses, Beijing was becoming a city of shadowy intrigue.

**Tags:** 1989, 6/4, Philip J Cunningham, Tiananmen, Tiananmen Moon